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SAFE MOVEMENT IN THE CITY

Street Children and Youth in Three African Cities

Briefing Paper 7 · June 2016

KEY POINTS

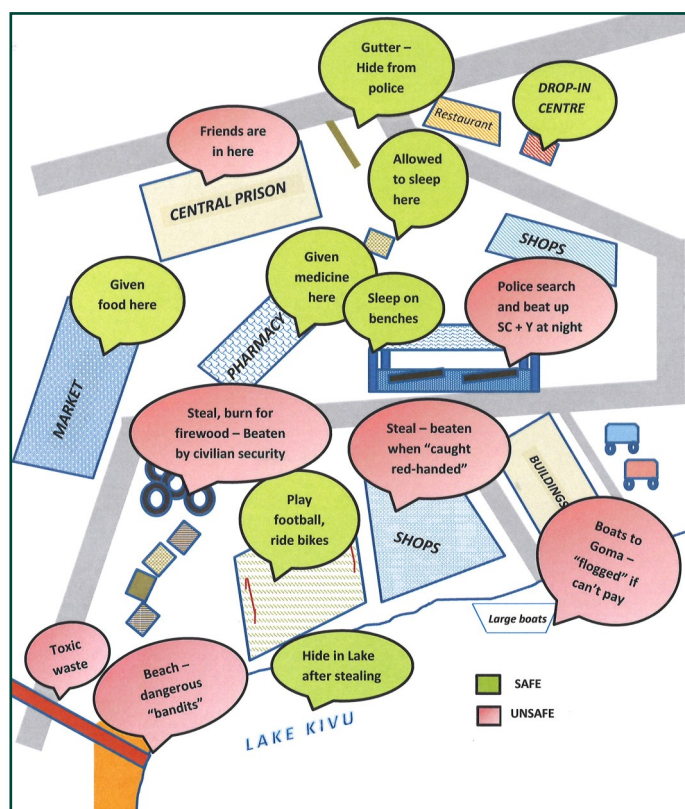
- Safe movement in the city is a constant challenge for street children and youth as they conduct their lives and earn their livelihoods in public spaces.
- Developing awareness of where and when they can move safely at different times of day and night, street children and youth adjust their movement and routines to protect themselves from violence, arrest and humiliation.
- Experiences of safe movement are complex, as the nature of locations and risk vary depending on the time of day, the presence or absence of the police and security forces and other external events.

INTRODUCTION

Six focus groups (18 in total) were undertaken in Accra (Ghana) and Harare (Zimbabwe) in June and July of 2013 and in Bukavu (Democratic Republic of Congo) in October 2014, involving over 200 participants of the *Growing up on the Streets* project. In each group, street children and youth mapped their local areas to identify spaces they felt to be 'safe' and 'unsafe' (see map). Together they marked those places where they sleep, store possessions, bathe, find food or work in the market areas, streets and illegal settlements. Many places were marked both 'safe' and 'unsafe', due to the changing nature of places at different times of day and other circumstances outside young people's control. Previous briefing papers have explored how street children and youth access food, shelter, work and earnings; here we explore the complexity and vulnerability of life on the streets, as street children and youth negotiate safe movement whilst meeting their daily needs.

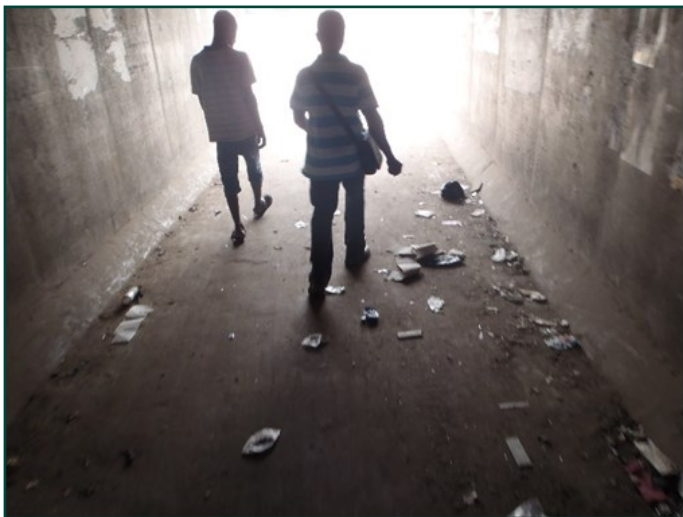
JOURNEYS IN THE DAY AND NIGHT

Street children and youth's daily journeys are primarily localised, moving from their sleeping place to the city market, to purchase items to sell, seek work, or look for opportunities to steal. "I stroll around [places] looking for life, to find something



Composite map re-drawn from field work notes showing key types of locations and activities indicated by participants (Bukavu, October 2014).

which can help me afford to buy a pair of shoes or clothes, so that I can live like a human being" (Bukavu Group 2). For most journeys the mode of transport is "our legs" (Harare Group 6), with the additional expense of public transport only incurred at certain times: "I take a bus, a taxi or motorbike if I know that I have money and it is now very dark and late to get to the space where I sleep" (Bukavu Group 1).



Underpass, Accra.

Daily routines and spacial routes are adapted according to the changing character of their local area, at different times of day and night. Opinions can vary even within groups on which places are safe or dangerous, depending on individual experiences. For some “the morning it is not good but the evening time the place becomes safe” (Accra Group 1); for others, “night is bad [...] police my come and beat us up and no one will come to assist us, so night is not safe.” (Harare Group 1). In Bukavu, “I like the daytime because I am totally free: I can smoke hemp and take alcohol knowing that there is no policeman who can reach the place.” (Group 3).

PROTECTIVE STRATEGIES

Some participants cite faith in helping to ensure their safe movement: “I am safe because God helps me go around everywhere I need to.” For another it is simply down to chance: “if I am unlucky I will be caught and beaten, whereas if I am lucky, I will go around without problem” (both Bukavu Group 2).

Areas are avoided completely where young people have no local knowledge, risk being beaten up by the informal leaders in an area, fear arrest, or because they are from a different ethnic group. They seek to avoid places where there may be “people pick pocketing you”, or places which are “full of cars”, or “where the junky men smoke wee [marijuana] and sniff cocaine,” because “that place is not safe” (Accra Group 1). These may include places which are “full of robbers”, where they fear peer pressure if friends or acquaintances are engaged in criminal activity: “if I

should go and live there and I am not careful I will join the robbery” (Accra Group 3). Alternatively, they may adopt aggressive behaviour and arm themselves with “a weapon, such as a knife, screw-driver, or a spanner” to protect themselves or their possessions as “there are some older and stronger street boys who can hassle you, wishing to take your items by force” (Bukavu Group 3). Or they may adopt a non-aggressive demeanour to appear “humble” so “people will like you so you can go wherever” (Accra Group 5). Appearance is also important in all three cities to ensure personal safety; owning and keeping clothes or shoes clean and tidy is challenging, but being dirty increases the risk of being attacked. In Accra, if “you are walking barefoot they might think that you are a thief, so when someone steals they will suspect you and beat you up” (Group 8). Similarly, in Harare “if you are dirty person like that boy; if you pass through a crowd and if a person says his phone is stolen, you will be the first suspect” (Group 6). In Bukavu, it is important to blend in, “if I am clean and wear clean clothes no one will notice that I am a street boy [...] but if you are dirty and something has been stolen you must be arrested and beaten.” (Group 5).



Busy junction, Harare.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Friendships and familiarity with an area provides a sense of belonging and safety. Groups of young people tend to identify themselves with one area, where they stay with friends or among those of their ethnic group. As a result, the city consists of territorial boundaries; entering some areas as a stranger is risky and seen as threatening: “I don’t have any connections there so to go there becomes a problem” (Accra Group 8). The trade-off is places where they feel they

belong: “some places I can’t enter, but if it was to be our place, I can enter there” (Accra Group 3). In Harare, a “base” is where street children and youth sleep, prepare food and access work. Staying in one base builds a cohesive group, gives them a sense of belonging and ownership and they can adapt the base for their needs: “our place is like Chiadzwa diamond fields – it is secured; that is where our life is. There is our bedroom, bathroom; we play soccer there; there is a restaurant where drugs and beer are taken” (Harare Group 5). They build trust and social capital among themselves and with those who live locally: “the neighbours are people that know that we do not steal from them [...] we play with their children so they know that we mean them no trouble” (Harare Group 1). Changing bases can draw the suspicions of peers: “a person who changes bases much is a thief; a straight person stays at one place” (Harare Group 5).



Aftermath of a fire in Accra.

GENDER, SAFETY AND AUTHORITIES

For both female and male street children and youth, safety is both physical and emotional; a space where, “you are not discriminated against and you can socialise with people there; and they do not think evil of you” (Harare Group 1) where, according to one female participant, “people do not frown at you” (Harare Group 4). In Bukavu a group of girls defined safety as “not to be jeered at, not to be insulted, not to be thrown stones at, not shout that people should close their doors because ‘nyambwe’ (thief) comes when I pass by” (Group 6). For a group of boys there it was “a place where he is not troubled or threatened”; “where people care for you, feed you, and look after you”; where “a person looks after you, and you look after him” (Group 1).

Female and male street children and youth in all three sites recounted similar experiences around movement in the city, sharing accounts of knives being used to threaten and steal, and occasionally to attack and even kill other young people; “he put the hand in the pocket and brought out knife and stabbed him; and that was it” (Accra Group 2). Incidents involving knives and beatings form the most violent experiences for boys; for girls there was the additional fear and experience of rape, including rape by multiple perpetrators, known as “gala” in Accra or “chain sex” in Bukavu. For all participants there was clearly a fear of violence against their person, leading them to constrain their own mobility and restrict themselves to certain parts of the city.

Both boys and girls often described those tasked with law enforcement as perpetrators of rape, violence and theft. A female participant in Bukavu states: “It is said that the police secures people, but if you ‘happen to fall in their hands’, you must ‘see red’ (suffer). He threatens you with a gun, charges and declares that he will kill you and you will be found dead in the morning! In the face of this threat, you are obliged to give in and say ‘here you are’” (Bukavu Group 6).

Each of the three cities has a network of authorities with power over street children and youth’s lives, including the police, soldiers, marines, security guards, council police and city market wardens. In Bukavu, in addition there are at least two civilian security groups, sanctioned by the authorities, which operate freely at a street level, beating and detaining street children and youth.

Together the security forces have a significant impact on safe movement, and street children and youth in all three cities described how they are targeted by the police. In Harare, this may be exacerbated by their visible presence on the street in bases: “the people on the streets do commit crimes but there are others that do not; but now they [the police] beat us all.” Another participant described being “beaten up by a stick” because he was “warming at a fire at a bin”, while a third complained that “if there is a robbery and they do not find the thief they will come and beat us” (all Group 4). A military presence there means



Polluted river and industrial plant form the boundary of an informal settlement in Accra.

there are soldiers who beat the boys, steal from them and rape the girls: “in the last week it was not safe as the soldiers did not take long before they come to the alleyway to beat us. When they have no money they will come looking for money to buy mbanje [marijuana], they know that if they beat about 15 street kids there, one of those street kids will pay money. There was a time when they were a lot of girls there and they would come and beat people and then take the girls” (Harare Group 1).

In Accra and the city market wardens disrupt selling on the streets and the police arrest street children and youth they suspect of using drugs: “when you bribe them they will leave you, you can give them 5 cedis or 10 cedis and they will allow you to go, but if you do not bribe them, straight to the police station!” (Group 4). However, the presence of the police is also reassuring for some: “Sir, there are police and soldiers all around so you can’t go and fool there [...] so the place is safe” (Accra Group 7).

CONCLUSIONS

In Accra, Bukavu and Harare, safe movement is a negotiation, and many young people limit their movement to protect themselves from violence, modifying their behaviour to fit with times or places which they perceive to be safer. Their relations with

those who should help to keep them safe are at best ambiguous, with extreme violence used by those in authority against street children and youth. While it may be accurate to state that “true security cannot be found on the street” (Bukavu Group 1), friendship, faith, and most of all the situated knowledge of street children and youth serve to protect them and help preserve their wellbeing.

Characteristics of Safe Places	Characteristics of Unsafe Places
Availability of goods and services	Theft by other (older, bigger) street children and youth
Availability of work	No privacy, e.g. at the communal bathing facility
Respect and good behaviour amongst the group	People taking or dealing drugs, drinking and gambling
To be able to walk freely without being questioned or challenged	Risk of fire or flooding, destroying shacks and possessions
Social spaces where music and dancing take place	Fighting and violence being commonplace
Sleeping places where there is trust among friends	Rapes having taken place there
Familiarity with an area	Where friends or others take or deal drugs
Personal demeanour and behaviour	Prostitution, blamed for the spread of STIs
Presence of police, soldiers or security	The police – fear of arrest, wrongful accusation or beatings
Safety in numbers – walking in groups	Council authorities clearing informal settlements
Walking with only one or two others to avoid suspicion or notice	People do not speak up if they see you being beaten up
Places where you can get both shelter and food	Soldiers come to buy drugs or beat people
Good reputation and social capital	Perceived as thieves
Drop in Centres run by NGOs	Places ‘belonging’ to another group

Table. Characteristics identified by participants across the three cities; places can be safe or unsafe depending on the time of day. “If we say a place is safe we do not mean that it is 100% safe. The safety is on average” (Harare Group 1).



BackstageTrust

For further information on the research plus Briefing Papers using the words of street children and youth themselves:
www.streetinvest.org/quotes · quotes@dundee.ac.uk · quotes@streetinvest.org

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